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Wreck Off Triton

By ALFRED COPPEL

His plans were thorough. Every risk had been closely considered. Now Ron Carnavon, ruthless convict, was ready to loot the wrecked spaceship of its sapphire treasure, and thrust his warped power around the entire, antagonistic EMV triangle.

RON CARNAVON had been the skipper of the late *Thunderbird*, and it was common knowledge in every port of the EMV triangle that he had scuttled her. There was a price on his head, and the High Space Guard was combing the spacelanes for him—and for the *Thunderbird*. For the *Thunderbird* was a treasure ship.

But Carnavon was a cautious man and no fool, for all that he'd committed barratry. He left the *Thunderbird* in a Trojan orbit a million miles off Triton, ruptured and spilling corpses into space. He took a spaceboat and jetted sunward to the Hol-

comb Foundation Outpost on Oberon. Then he stowed away on the mail ship to Canalopolis, still carrying the chart that showed the *Thunderbird's* position. In the Canal City, Carnavon evaded the lax Guard cordons and found himself a renegade Martian hypnosurgeon to change his face and fingerprints.

From then on it was easy. Across Syrtis Major by sand-ski to Marsport posing as a prospector. And from Marsport down the Grand Canal to the spaceman's boneyard at Yakki. It was there that he met and hired Pop Wills and the *Carefree*.

Ron Carnavon acted with characteristic

caution when he chose Pop and the *Carefree* to do the ghoul work on the ship he had murdered. Pop's ship was a rusty bucket, but well enough fixed to reach Triton where the *Thunderbird's* corpse orbited, her vault heavy with Plutonian sapphires. And Pop needed work badly. He was almost too broke to outfit his ship for the flight. Carnavon noted with curling lip that most of Pop's assets had long ago been liquidated to buy gin. The long years in space had taken a toll of the old man. Actually a greater toll than even Carnavon could have imagined.

Pop and the *Carefree* fitted in with Carnavon's plans to perfection. Pop had been in trouble more than once with the High Space Guard. Pop was an old soak who wouldn't be missed. When something happened to the *Carefree*, the rest of the beached wrecks in Yakki would only shake their heads and agree that Pop had pushed the old bucket a few Gs too hard somewhere. That was just the end the wrecker had in mind for Pop when his job was finished, too.

It was only reasonable. He couldn't let Pop live to tell the Guard that Ron Carnavon had had a hypnosurgical metamorphosis. Even a fortune in sapphires couldn't buy the High Space Guard. It was far too well-heeled with Holcomb Foundation money, and it took its duties to the inhabitants of the Earth-Mars-Venus Triangle seriously. A cautious man would realize this and take the proper steps. In this case the proper steps would be the elimination of Pop Wills when his job was done.

But everyone makes mistakes. Carnavon made one when he selected Pop and the *Carefree*. With all the rusty hulks dotting the ramps of Yakki, and with all the even rustier skippers there, he should have hired someone else. Anyone else. Ron Carnavon should have connected Pop Wills with the twelve-year-old cabin boy of the *Thunderbird*. The youngster's name had been Wills, too. But of course, Carnavon couldn't have been expected to remember everything. Just coincidence—but those things do happen.

So these two lifted from Mars together. A captain who had wrecked his own ship and a gin-soaked old man whose only son

had died because of it. And neither knew the other for what he was. To Carnavon, Pop was just a fall-guy doing his job in proper sucker fashion. And to Pop Wills, Carnavon was just John Smith who wanted to go to Grid M332254-89OK off Triton and was willing to pay well for the privilege.

The wrecker ordered the course and Pop set it. Mars began to dwindle and the Belt loomed up ahead. The *Carefree* threaded her way through the rocky maze and on past Saturn and Uranus in a free-falling arc. She was slow, but in space "slow" is a relative term. The Outer Planets were in triple conjunction and with their help, the old boat made time. Carnavon checked the course daily, and Pop accepted the corrections without protest. After all, John Smith was paying for the trip and he seemed to know what he was doing. No questions asked. Carnavon liked that. No questions, no trouble. He couldn't have been more wrong.

IT'S hard to say in mere words what old Pop must have felt when he picked up the wreck of the *Thunderbird* on the radar. He recognized the image, of course. The *Thunderbird* was unique among spacers. Then he checked her position against the chart that Carnavon had marked and realized why they had come. He realized too who this John Smith was, and hate pulsed through him in sickening waves. Pop wasn't a brave man, and he was past his prime, but he could still hate.

Almost without conscious thought, Pop broke out the Ultra-Wave and began calling the Guard. He broadcast full particulars, co-ordinates, descriptions, everything. He was at it when Carnavon found him and sent him crashing against the control panels with a smashing overhand right to the mouth.

Pop sprawled on the metal decking and watched the wrecker carefully smash every communicating device on the ship's panel. There was a throbbing pain in his head where he had struck the shabbily padded control console, and the thick taste of blood was in his bruised mouth. He watched Carnavon like an animal, a hurt, impotently raging beast. And he began to be afraid.

Even his hate couldn't spare him that, for Pop was afraid to die and he knew just what his chances were now.

Carnavon, on the other hand, didn't waste time hating. He didn't know why Pop had called copper, and he didn't really care. Pop wasn't important. The sapphires in the *Thunderbird's* vault. *They* were important. He'd come too far to abandon them now.

It would take nine minutes for Pop's radio appeal to reach the nearest Guard base, Carnavon calculated. And it would take six hours for the fastest Guard ship to reach them after that. He could board the *Thunderbird* and loot her in not more than two hours. That would still give the *Carefree* a four hour start on the Guard, and in deep space four hours were as good as four thousand. Carnavon still wasn't worried. The wrecking of the *Thunderbird* had been the work of months, and he wasn't going to panic now. Ron Carnavon wasn't that sort of a criminal.

Blaster in hand, he motioned Pop to his feet. He wondered vaguely just why the old man had taken such a chance. He couldn't have any notions of collecting the reward for Carnavon. The amount was less than the amount he was getting for doing this—Carnavon smiled bleakly—salvage job. And the old man was a coward. He could see it in the trembling of the blue-veined hands, in the shifting faintness of the watery blue eyes. The wrecker shrugged aside the thoughts as unimportant and set to work.

With a blaster in his ribs, Pop Wills did as he was told. He braked the *Carefree* to a stop twenty miles from the ruptured hulk of the liner. There were beads of sweat standing out on Pop's forehead and his hands shook on the firing console. A thin trickle of dark blood marred his stubbled chin. His battered lips were unsteady.

For a few bad moments, Pop Wills thought Carnavon was going to blast him as soon as the *Carefree* lost way, but then even his gin-soaked mind began to understand that the end wasn't quite yet. Carnavon needed help looting the murdered liner. If he was going to lay his hands on her valuables before the Guard appeared, he'd have to get Pop working with him.

Maybe if Pop had been more of a man he could have stopped the wrecker cold right there, but long years of boozing had left Pop weak. He could hate well enough, but fear conquers even hate. And that blaster that followed him in every movement made Pop's thin blood run cold. Life—even a life like Pop Wills'—was better than the black void of death. Pop was ready to buy a few more minutes of life at almost any price, even from the man who had killed his boy. The old man was like a rusty watch-spring—battered and wound to the utmost limit. And jammed there. Frozen by the reality of that ugly blaster and the cold eyes behind it, Pop would help Carnavon. He couldn't help himself. And his hate expanded to include his own senile weakness. . . .

THE *Thunderbird* spun slowly in the light of the faraway sun, the rent in her hull gaping like a mouthful of jagged teeth. She had been a beautiful thing once, but she was ugly now in death. She had not died gracefully. Her back had been broken and her innards scattered. She orbited sullenly, and around her spun the broken fragments of her inner body—the bloated, frozen corpses of the men she'd carried. Against the backdrop of the stars and the blaze of the Milky Way, she seemed to be a blot on the heavens. Pop Wills and Ron Carnavon watched her, each of them with his own thoughts. Then the wrecker motioned toward the suit lockers with his blaster.

It took a bit of doing to get into his own pressure suit and still keep the blaster pointed at Wills, but Carnavon was a large man, and supple, and he managed it well enough.

The *Carefree* had no escape boat, so there was nothing for it but to rely on the suit motors to take them across to the *Thunderbird*. It promised to be slow going, for the suit motors were weak and produced only one tenth G of thrust. Almost anything thrown out ahead by a man in a space-suit was enough to stop him cold. The recoil overcame the suit-motor with ridiculous ease and though the motor labored mightily, it would take a long while to reestablish the

original direction of movement. But Carnavon *had an answer for that, too.*

A quick check of the radar showed that there were still no Guard ships within hailing distance. Carnavon's original estimate of the time it would take the Space Guard to arrive on the scene turned out to be surprisingly accurate.

He connected his suit to Pop's with a short cable and snap-hooks and together they made their way to the *Carefree's* dorsal valve.

Carnavon had no intention of sweating out a long, slow crossing to the hulk, so he ran the lock pressure up high and waited until the outer hatch was lined up with the derelict liner. Then with a sudden movement, he spun the wheel and popped the outer portal. Pop and Carnavon shot into space like grotesque *bolas*. The *Thunderbird* loomed up ahead.

Pop kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. He saw more than an old man might be expected to see, too. For instance he saw that Carnavon—cautious though he might be—had neglected to take an extra magazine for his blaster. That meant that there were just three shots in the weapon. One of which, Pop figured, would be used against the vault of the scuttled liner. Not that the old man was making any plans. He was still too weighted by his fear and his sense of impotence for that. He merely noticed, and prayed to the gods of space that one of those shots in the blaster might not be meant for him.

As they drew near the liner, Pop felt nausea churning his stomach. The ship was surrounded by satellites. Space-bloated bodies, naked and misshapen in the bitter light of the dim sun that reflected off the pitted flanks of the burst vessel. Spread-eagled grotesquely, the corpses circled their ship, puffy things of horror with staring eyes and extended fingers. Other things, too, circled the hulk. Small, commonplace items. A clock, a chair, shattered crockery. Tiny, inconsequential things, all mutely accusing—all muttering silently that their ship had been betrayed by someone who should have protected her.

Pop glanced over at Carnavon. Through the steelglass bubble of his helmet he could see the wrecker's face. There was no ex-

pression on it other than concentration—and greed. Pop knew about greed. He'd lived with greed and degradation a lot in his last few years. He hated Carnavon *even more now for having reminded him—but* he was still too sick with futility to do more than tell himself that he had done all he could do. He *had* called the Guard, *after* all. And then, for an awful moment he found himself regretting that he had done even that and thereby lost all hope of life . . .

Their magnetic shoes touched the *Thunderbird's* hull with a sound faintly carried through the air in their suits. They stood on the curving surface, etched in black against the starry sky. A few feet *away* from them, the terminator was inching toward them as the derelict rotated slowly.

WITH Carnavon leading the way, they clumped heavily to the ripped and tortured hull-plates where the *Thunderbird* had been sundered. By the light of their helmet lights Pop could see the thoroughness of the wrecker's work. He had been her captain, this Carnavon, and he had known just how to murder her. The outer hull was a shambles and the pressure hull holed in three places. It had been a thorough job. Only one prepared for the sudden horror of her death could have survived it. Pop Wills thought of his boy and sobbed.

The dark companionways were empty, blown clean by the violence of the *Thunderbird's* death. Ron Carnavon led the way down into the ship to the purser's office and the vault.

Rubble cluttered the small room, bulkheads bent awry and pipes and wires littered the deck. Carnavon turned Pop loose and set him to work cleaning out a path to the vault. Pop's breath was coming in shuddering, grating gasps when he finished the work a half-hour later. Carnavon nodded approvingly and motioned him away from the vault.

Pop watched while the wrecker braced himself and took careful aim at the vault's lock mechanism with the blaster. There was a searing flash of blue flame, and red sparks showered as the oxy-hydrogen bolt sliced

into the steel of the door. Pop found himself praying fervently that it would take two more shots.

Carnavon fired again, and the tiny room blazed. Pop muttered shakily under his breath and waiting for the wrecker to blast just once more.

The lock surrendered in a trickle of white-hot slag and Pop felt himself sink low. There was still that one shot left for him—and he wasn't needed now.

The door swung open and Carnavon knelt to rifle the vault. When he at last straightened, he held a pool of jagged blue fire in his gloved hand. The gems sparkled with a life of their own—two dozen faceted beauties—each worth a king's ransom—and each bought with a man's life.

Presently they stood again on the outer hull, under an unreal canopy of stars. Nearby, a ghastly satellite was swinging inward toward the ship. Pop stared at it and back to Carnavon. He began to understand what the wrecker planned. He was going to leave him here—on the wreck. And he would die here. He understood that the shot that remained in the blaster wasn't for him after all. Carnavon wasn't going to waste it on him. There was a spanner in the wrecker's hand and he now advanced purposefully toward Pop Wills.

Pop stepped backwards, retreating from the heavy figure of the wrecker. Fear was surging in waves through him—fear mixed with blind hate and contempt for himself and his senile weakness. Overhead, against the stars, the awful satellite drew nearer.

Carnavon reduced the power in his magnetic shoes and moved lightly toward Pop, the spanner raised to strike. The old man stumbled against a long shard of steel on the hull that floated upward at his touch. Fear paralyzed him, and he stood now, waiting for the blow of the spanner that would smash his helmet and leave him a distended corpse spinning through space. Above him, the satellite spun inward.

Pop glanced up—into the agonized, dead face of a twelve year old boy. He shrieked. The sound deafened him in the bubble of his helmet. All the fear and weakness turned to a bitter hate and surged forward in one insane motion toward his tormentor. The

long shard of steel came to hand like a lance. The rusted, warped old watch spring that was Pop Wills recoiled and unwound in one raging moment. He charged Carnavon.

Carnavon evaded the clumsy charge instinctively. With an almost unconscious motion, he raised the blaster and fired point-blank.

The searing bolt caught Pop Wills in the chest and spun him around, tattered ribbons of charred flesh and melted metal from his suit intermingled. He curled inward upon himself in an awkward graceless fashion and sank to the hull plates, a nimbus of ice flowing from the gap in his suit as the water-vapor and blood spurted into the vacuum. But there was something strangely like a smile on his face as life left him. Pop had conquered his fear at last.

But Carnavon, on the other end of the bolt of fire that had ended Pop Wills' life, spun outward—away from the *Thunderbird*, away from the *Carefree*, end over end, driven by the fiery recoil of his own weapon. At a speed considerably less than the muzzle-velocity of the blast, but still much higher than the best speed of the feeble suit motor, Ron Carnavon spun into space. Out and away, the precious sapphires spilling out of his hand, glittering in the faint sunlight as they took up their orbits about him like tiny, mocking moonlets. . . .

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